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THE CHOICES IN HUNGARY

By Oscar Jászi

THE information coming out of Hungary is so conflicting and so strongly colored that world opinion is bewildered. Yet it is important that democracies understand events there aright. The author of these pages stands outside the political struggles of present-day Hungary; his only aim is to give an objective picture of what is going on in that tortured country.

Twenty-three years ago, when the White terroristic system of Admiral Horthy was recognized and supported by the western Powers, thus achieving a semblance of legitimacy, the propaganda apparatus of Budapest was successful in the United States in distorting the truth and presenting all Hungarian democratic efforts as a continuation of the unfortunate Bolshevik revolution of Béla Kun. I was glad at that time to have an opportunity of presenting the essential features of the Hungarian tragedy in the pages of this review. My conclusions were that without a complete democratization of Hungary, resulting in a new internal and external policy, a new war in Central Europe was inevitable; and that the only hope that the Danubian and Balkan nations would escape becoming victims of foreign imperialistic schemes lay in their establishment of a free-trade Danubian Confederation.[1] Later on, I tried to show that the nationality struggles in this region had led to the dismemberment of Hungary along the lines of the Trianon Treaty, foreseen by Louis Kossuth as early as 1850.[2] Finally, I emphasized the social and moral bankruptcy of Hungary under the system of the latifundia.[3]

Today, following Hungary's conquest by the Russian Army, the danger of misunderstanding by the west lies in the tendency of both Communists and progressive anti-Communists to present the picture of the new Hungary in terms that are too schematic.[4] The viewpoints of the anti-Communists are roughly analogous to the ideology of the former Second International and of the Men-

[1] Oscar Jászi, "Dismembered Hungary and Peace in Central Europe," FOREIGN AFFAIRS, December 1923.

[2] Oscar Jászi, "Kossuth and the Treaty of Trianon," FOREIGN AFFAIRS, October 1933.

[3] Oscar Jászi, "Feudal Agrarianism in Hungary," FOREIGN AFFAIRS, July 1938.

[4] There is a third type of propaganda which distorts reality, that of the reactionaries of the old régime. This, for the moment, is crushed in Hungary. I shall not refer to it because its bad faith is quite evident.

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sheviks, respectively, and oversimplify the situation — probably because both are still influenced by the original Marxist outlook. For the Communists, of course, the liberation of Hungary is complete, and the Hungarian people stand on the threshold of a rebirth; the period of full democracy lies just ahead. On the other hand, the exponents of western Socialism and the former Mensheviks seem to be unduly pessimistic. They say that what is taking place in Hungary is simply a repetition of what has occurred in the Baltic states, in Bulgaria, Rumania and Jugoslavia. In their eyes, the sovietization of Hungary by means of a Machiavellian policy and a strong dose of terrorism is in full swing.

In my opinion, this picture is false. Though a common pattern is developing slowly in all the "liberated" countries, one can foresee a very different result in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary from that in the countries which are undergoing a process of immediate sovietization. The common pattern results from the fact that Soviet Russia will not tolerate the existence of any doubtful government in this area. The foundations of a Russian bloc are already solidly laid, in spite of the fact that the Communists — deeply pacifistic at heart — deprecate any movement toward a bloc system elsewhere in Europe or in the world. This means that the armies, diplomacies and foreign economic policies of the peoples of this region will be thoroughly *gleichgeschaltet* with those of the "Soviet fatherland," which will extract as much economic advantage from the process as possible. But this is not the whole picture. It can be easily imagined that the inner political, cultural and ideological life of these countries will assume various different patterns, in accordance with the past of each and the moral orientation of each. The new situation, then, will not be radically different from the old one. These small countries have always been satellite countries, in former times mostly under the sway of Berlin, exercised through Vienna. Now the Hohenzollern-Hapsburg imperialism will be supplanted by Soviet imperialism (though it seems outrageous to all true Communists to have the two terms used in conjunction). Whether this new imperialism will be advantageous or detrimental to the peoples involved will depend on the methods of the Soviets, on the influence of liberal, democratic and Socialist energies in the liberated countries, and on the economic and spiritual influence of the western democracies.

I do not have the space here to elaborate this conception,

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however, and to show the very great divergencies between the political and ideological situations of the countries in question. I must restrict myself mainly to Hungarian developments.

II

In order to understand the course of events in Hungary since the Russian conquest, we must recall in headline style certain important antecedents in the country's historical evolution.

Hungary never was in the orbit of the Greek Orthodox Church. Its religious horizon was strictly Roman Catholic, though later with a very decisive admixture of Protestantism, which fought for religious liberty and against the Hapsburgs. At the same time, the cultural and the ideological influence of Hungarian Jewry became an important factor. Hungarian constitutionalism, much as it was vaunted, was a typical feudal growth; it gave neither the masses nor the middle classes much of anything to say. Yet though the analogies often drawn between English and Hungarian parliamentarianism were part of a fallacious propaganda, it cannot be denied that the technical formalities of constitutionalism and the constitutional struggles within the ruling classes, especially between the feudal aristocracy and the middle class gentry, made a strong impression on the growing bourgeoisie and on a part of the peasantry which was anti-Hapsburg and believed ardently in the teachings of Louis Kossuth.

One must also emphasize that the best representatives of Hungarian thought and literature were penetrated by western liberal ideas, and that some of them became important exponents of western democratic values. The revolution of 1848, which became a legend before it had become a reality, consciously followed the great French models; and even earlier, at the end of the eighteenth century, the conspiracy of the Abbot Martinovics was impregnated by Jacobin traditions. And the last flowering of the liberal Hungarian spirit, the October revolution under the leadership of Károlyi, which occurred immediately after the collapse of the Hapsburg monarchy, produced the most comprehensive and enlightened program in the history of Hungarian democracy, including the dismemberment of the feudal estates, universal suffrage, and the solution of the nationality problem in the framework of a federal structure. The problems of this democracy were genuinely similar to the efforts of the most advanced groups of the west. For example, the Sociological

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Society, often called the Hungarian Fabians, under the leadership of a first-class philosopher, Julius Pikler, worked hard on the problem of reconciliation between Socialism and freedom. This orientation toward the west was so outspoken that often the better elements of the old feudal society became real Anglomaniacs, introducing, even though superficially, the English concept of the gentleman. This approach was cordially reciprocated by many representatives of the English aristocracy.

Finally must be noted the special character of the Hungarian people: a sober, hard-working, extremely intelligent ethnic group, remarkably free from the mysticism and the extreme racial fanaticism of the Slavs and the Rumanians.

More recent historical events added to the cleavage between Hungary and the Balkan countries. Feudalism, helped by representatives of the western democracies, was soon successful in undermining the democratic republic set up under Károlyi. The ensuing Communistic revolution followed a pure Russian world-revolutionary model, with chaotic experiments in socialization, dreams of the *sovkhozes*, and occasional hysterical outbursts of terrorism. It was short-lived, but it made a deep impression on Hungary's conservative soul. And in spite of the fact that very soon a much bloodier and more inhuman White Terror supplanted the Red (under the secret leadership of Admiral Horthy), the great majority of the people became immune to the Bolshevik virus. Thereafter nobody ever wished to renew the orthodox patterns of Russian Communism. The messianic dream of Bolshevism had lost its strength; and it has not revived.

Indeed, not only has it lost its hold on the minds of the masses, but it has faded even in the minds of the Communist leaders. The many Hungarian Communist exiles in Moscow witnessed quite a strange ideology in operation in the promised land. The Soviet schools no longer trained them in the Leninist religion of hundred percent Communism and immediate world revolution, but in a ruthless *Realpolitik* imbued with the spirit of Stalin. They came to look on the many mistakes of Béla Kun's revolutionary fantasy in a cool, detached and critical temper; and returning to the old country at the close of this war, and to its splendid, gay capital, now completely in ruins and in the grip of acute famine, they saw clearly that the old heroic methods of unmitigated Communism should not be applied again. Only recently the best mind among

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the Hungarian Communist writers, Joseph Révai, emphasized in the official Communist paper the absolute necessity of close coöperation with the peasants and the creative intelligentsia on a strictly non-Communistic basis.

III

Now we are in a position to understand better what happened in Hungary in the critical months after the liberation.

The revolution which followed can be described as one which needed an incubator. It had one — the Russian Army and Russian diplomacy. And the revolution which the Russian incubator helped nurture was a sober, carefully planned revolution with a rigid bureaucratic tinge. In Hungary's state of exhaustion and complete disorganization, revolution had to come that way, or else take the form of a hopeless, chaotic uprising. The radical transformation which is now going on in Hungary could not have been achieved by the purely parliamentarian methods of the western democracies, the less so because the whole diplomacy of the west is impregnated with a counter-revolutionary spirit, the spirit which in Hungary destroyed the strictly constitutional experiment of Károlyi. This is why even great masses who do not sympathize with the Soviets regard the present methods of transformation as necessary and why the best minds of the new Hungary support the incubator revolution.

The main features of the transformation were these:

(1) Two simon-pure Horthy generals were asked to assume military responsibility. They had to choose between becoming *locum tenentes* of the Red Army in the highest positions, or being designated as war criminals.

(2) The Communist leaders in close contact with the Red Army of Occupation made an appeal for a "Popular Front" with the Small Landholders Party — the principal organized political force in the country — and the lower bourgeoisie of the towns. A new element in this coalition was the National Peasant Party which originated in a group sometimes called the "Hungarian Narodniki." This group was limited in numbers but represented considerable moral and intellectual energies; its members called themselves village-researchers, who "went among the people" and studied their sufferings and problems.[5]

(3) The old demagogy of the first Bolshevik revolution was

[5] *Cf.* Oscar Jászi, "Feudal Agrarianism in Hungary," *op. cit.*

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669 completely absent: Communism had become respectable and gentlemanly. Even the criticism of certain governmental measures by the Roman Catholic hierarchy was listened to with respect, and when Archbishop Mindszenthy attacked the expropriation of the estates as a "product of hatred," the rejoinder was moderate and tactful. Though the large ecclesiastical estates were dismembered like the others, liberal grants-in-aid were provided for the maintenance of the lower clergy, the churches and parochial buildings. Generally speaking, there is not much talk about Communism in Hungary today; the leitmotiv is democracy with intensely patriotic overtones.

(4) The chaotic "people's tribunals," which gave vent to an outburst of popular passion, were soon legalized and according to competent observers their judgments are rather moderate. Only about 100 death sentences seem to have been pronounced and execution in several cases was suspended. After the blood-bath organized by the Nazis and their satellites, which cost the lives of hundreds of thousands, this popular vengeance was surely not excessive.

(5) There is no capitalistic party or organization. Hungarian capitalism was a kind of a "domestic Jew" of Hungarian feudalism,[6] never an independent political force. None of the parties of the coalition exhibits the smallest desire to conserve capitalistic monopolies or to create new ones.

(6) The Communists display the utmost opportunism in handling political patronage, using anyone who can be regarded as a reliable instrument for their purposes. Even men with reactionary records are accepted in public service if their coöperation seems to serve a useful end; for example, a routine Horthy diplomat was sent to Washington, and the able counter-revolutionary historian, Julius Szekfü, who served the Hapsburgs and the Horthy-Bethlen régimes with equal ardor, was sent to Moscow as ambassador. A great many less notable old-timers are in influential positions.

A number of university professors hastened to become members of the Communist Party. It should be noted, however, that this attitude is not necessarily a servile one. The younger, independent scholars are generally convinced that the old scholarship of the country has become utterly obsolete. The

[6] It was said in the old days that every Count had his domestic Jew, who managed his economic affairs and not seldom his political affairs also.

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foremost scholarly institution, the Hungarian Scientific Academy, 669
a creation of the great Count Széchenyi, served as a bulwark of reaction and an instrument of anti-democratic tendencies. Albert Szent-Györgyi, a Nobel prize winner, expressed a common opinion in his letter renouncing his seat in the Academy: "The Academy is in a large measure responsible for our national catastrophe . . . it has become the nest of servilism and half-science . . . it obstructs the road toward the rebuilding of the country."

(7) Another significant attitude of the new system is its artificial silence concerning the October revolution of 1918. Of course, it was impossible not to give an honorary seat to Károlyi in the National Assembly, but he has not yet reached home and his name is seldom mentioned. Though there is an acknowledged lack of men of higher intellectual capacities, Vambéry and several other leaders of the October revolution still stay away. Some written complaints appear to the effect that many reactionaries and even doubtful characters have been admitted into influential places, whereas leading Octobrists are under suspicion. The greatest figure of modern Hungary, and her foremost lyrical genius of the past 50 years, Andrew Ady, who did more than any other person to propagate the ideas of a democratic revolutionary Hungary, is very seldom mentioned during festivals or commemorations. The explanation is not obscure. The present rulers are not trying to carry out their much-heralded Communist program, but are putting into effect the essential points of the program of the October revolution; but they do not like to have the fact made too evident. A hero of the Hungarian underground and one of the most brilliant political writers of the past quarter of a century, Béla Zsolt, wrote recently: "Why do we not hear 'Andrew Ady' on the streets from every megaphone? Is it perhaps that we are afraid of the mirror of the past; the men of today of the standard of yesterday; the living of the rivalry of the dead? Our irate passions were right to destroy the statues of the past, but who will dare stand on the empty pedestals?"

This silent tension between the October revolution and the present revolution found symbolic expression in the proclamation of the Third Republic under the presidency of Zoltan Tildy, the leader of the Small Landholders Party. Many Hungarians both at home and in the United States felt that the new régime should have been under the honorary leadership of Michael Károlyi,

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669 who had worked and suffered more than any other person for the liquidation of the latifundia system and the democratization of Hungary. He began the dismemberment of the large estates by dividing his own domain, left the country as a pauper, was hounded by the counter-revolution and declared a traitor, and lived abroad in poverty, but without complaint and without for a minute abandoning his principles. No wonder public imagination saw in him a successor of two other great exiles, Rákóczi and Kossuth. Simple people, though not questioning the merits and qualities of President Tildy, did question such ingratitude toward a great moral leader. However, all is clear in terms of *Realpolitik*. Károlyi's firmness of principle makes him a dangerous person. Moreover, he is hated by many influential conservatives in the west as a traitor to his class. The present government has difficulties enough: why increase them out of sentimental considerations? Besides, the October revolution immediately arouses unpleasant memories of the Béla Kun dictatorship.

423 669 Be that as it may, the incubator revolution has the great merit of having carried out, without mercy and without hesitation, the fundamental idea of the new democratic Hungary — the division of all the landed estates among the landless peasantry. Of course, many experiments since the dissolution of the Hapsburg Monarchy have shown that a purely mechanical distribution of land does not lead automatically to a new and higher standard of popular existence. Only recently Hugh Seton-Watson (son of the noted historian) and a study group of experts concluded that the agrarian reforms in eastern Europe did very little for the rural population.[1] Nevertheless, it remains true that the expropriation of the feudal estates was the necessary first step for opening the gates for the flood of popular energies. If it is used wisely and undogmatically, the Russian conquest may bring about a real economic and moral transformation in Hungary.

IV

669 In the light of these facts and considerations, there is nothing mysterious about the results of the last elections in Hungary, which have been hotly debated and so differently interpreted. The total number of votes cast was 4,717,256. Of these, the Small

[1] *Cf.* Hugh Seton-Watson, "Eastern Europe Between the Wars." New York: Macmillan, 1945. Also Political and Economic Planning, "Economic Development of Southeastern Europe." Oxford University Press, 1945.

2 [See category 116, pp. 459-460 -- Analyst]

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Landholders Party received 2,688,101, the Social Democratic Party 821,566, the Communist Party 800,257, the National Peasant Party 322,988, the Citizens Democratic Party 78,522 and the Radical Party 5,762. The National Assembly comprises 409 members: the Small Landholders have 245, the Communists 70, the Social Democrats 69, the National Peasants 23, the Democrats 2. These returns reflect the present political forces in the country surprisingly accurately.

Of course, one often hears the assertion that the overwhelming victory of the Small Landholders Party was a result of the vote of feudal and capitalist reactionaries who had been dispossessed by the revolution and prohibited from building up a new party. Another explanation given is that the great strength of the Small Landholders Party was that it offered a chance to register a protest vote against the Russian occupation, which is, indeed, an enormous burden, especially for the rural population. However, both explanations are oversimplified. There surely was a considerable counter-revolutionary vote in the "conservative victory," and it cannot be denied that the long Russian occupation is both economically and morally unwelcome. The ghastly situation inside the country could hardly fail to make the latter so in any case. A plea for UNRRA help for Hungary states, for example, that there are 200,000 orphans to be cared for; that 400,000 children are suffering from rickets; that 17,000 of the children suffering from tuberculosis are without hospitalization or convalescent care, without medical supplies, proper nourishment, clothes or bedding; that there is not adequate food for nursing mothers, and no food or clothing for newborn babies; that surgeons are operating without anesthetics; that thousands of persons are dying as a result of the lack of insulin, penicillin, digitalis, sulfa drugs and other medicines; that there are no surgical dressings, iodine, X-ray films, or plaster of Paris; and that there were no warm clothes for the winter, not enough fuel and no supplies to repair the damaged homes. These terrible conditions are reflected in a continuous rise in crime.

Terrible as is this economic and hygienic situation, however, it is only a contributory influence in the political situation. The real cause of the success of the Small Landholders Party is that none of the Marxist parties could offer a real program to the peasants, the small bourgeoisie or considerable numbers of the intelligentsia — in short, to a majority of the country. The rigid

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class doctrine of the Marxist parties is alien to the traditional mentality and widespread religious feeling of the masses. In the election campaign, the Communists said not a word about the issue of private property versus Communism, and made no mention of the collectivization of land. Yet the issue was the village and small-town way of life versus vast bureaucratic organizations. Marxist Socialism's total disregard and misunderstanding of the values of rural life made it, in all its forms, inacceptable to the greater half of the population.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the Small Landholders Party is not reactionary, nor even conservative; it is a progressive party in favor of social and cultural reforms. It was the strongest in the country after the advent of Horthy, and though it was demoralized during the Bethlen period, and later became infected with adventurers, it has always remained healthy at the core. In coöperation with the "village researchers," it may perform great deeds in the future.

The elections in Hungary carry a great lesson for the progressives of all parties in all countries. It is often said that people who have once lived under an oligarchic rule or later under a Fascist dictatorship are not ripe for democracy — that after centuries of servitude they are unable to make proper use of the vote. This statement too is a half-truth, and such truth as is in it does not point primarily against the masses but against the corrupted middle and upper classes. The Hungarian people at their first fully free elections proved that their natural intelligence and sense of decency shows them the right political path. If they are not terrorized or cowed — in short, if political freedom lasts — and if they are granted the elementary material conditions of civilized life, which for them implies the growth of new forms of economic and cultural coöperation, I see no reason why they should not march resolutely toward the higher forms of western and Nordic peasant culture.

V

Can the equilibrium created by the recent elections be maintained? Hungary is in the Russian orbit. The military and economic ties binding her to Russia are tight (for example, the issue of banknotes recently became a privilege of the army of occupation). Will it be possible for her to establish a degree of independence — that is to say, freedom of political life, cultural

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self-determination and higher democratic forms of rural life? ooo

This question applies to countries other than Hungary. There are signs that in Czechoslovakia and even more in Austria forces exist which would be persistently opposed to thoroughgoing Sovietization. When the transformation in Hungary was just beginning, some hoped that it might be possible to create a Prague-Vienna-Budapest triangle, which might form an intermediary, twilight zone between the west and the east, between capitalistic democracy and full socialization; that is to say, they thought there might be coöperation among a group of states "neither capitalistic nor Bolshevik."

Such hopes were quite in accordance with all the official declarations of the United Nations. What destroyed them was the new spirit taken over by the conquerors from the Fascist and Nazi dictators, who used conquered peoples simply as pawns and chattels in their imperialistic game. Stalin directed this same policy against the Germans and the Poles. It became very popular, and soon the Czechs and the Slovaks clamored to put it into effect against their German and Hungarian minorities. No wonder it was popular. It solved old difficulties easily; it satisfied the passionate desire for revenge; it gratified personal grievances and enmities; above all, it gave welcome occasion for plunder on a vast scale to hungry masses. Unfortunately, at last even the defeated Hungarians adopted these barbarous methods and expelled 420,000 Germans. The story of this sad episode is not yet clear. Some people speak of Russian pressure; and it must be noted that there was some protest against the measure among Hungarian intellectuals. To my mind, it will in perspective prove to be a greater calamity for Hungary than was the expulsion of the Magyars from Slovakia, for it will deprive the Hungarian Government of much of the moral force of its protest against the Czechoslovak procedures, stated in such dignified terms by Foreign Minister Gyöngyössy.

An important task of the historians of this epoch will be to describe the horrors and insanities of this new age of migration of the peoples. Sad to say, the vague and hypocritical stipulations of paragraph XIII of the Potsdam Agreement gave them a kind of respectability. As an acute observer said, "it applied a humanistic figleaf to the inhumanities of the Polish and Czechoslovak procedures, already in full swing."

Needless to say, the hopes of a Danubian and Balkan federa-

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tion were utterly demolished by this spirit. Instead of a comprehensive democratic federalism we witness only new power-political schemes (often in the form of local pseudo-federations) for building up a system of blocs — which, of course, according to the United Nations ideology, do not and should not exist.

VI

Returning to the particular situation in Hungary, one may say that the idea of a continuation of the "Popular Front" coalition among industrial labor, the peasantry and the intelligentsia seems not to be utopian. There are strong tendencies at work to strengthen it. The new equilibrium appears somewhat precarious, however, due to the fact that it is imposed upon the Communists by the necessities of present-day conditions and is not the outcome of fundamental convictions. There are people who fear that should the Communist forces in Hungary become sufficiently stabilized, with full Russian support, and peasant aspirations be restricted to a use of the ballot which is not translated into terms of real life, a dictatorship may sovietize the country. Some think that a one-party system, composed of several silent and non-active parties under Communist domination, is imaginable.

For the idea of a middle zone between the western democracies and the Soviets to be revived, a number of conditions would have to be fulfilled. First of all, the convinced leaders of democracy in the countries concerned must keep their heads. Secondly, and imperatively, the western democracies must help; they must give energetic coöperation in fighting inflation and creating a healthy international economic structure. If, on the contrary, the reactionary tendencies in western diplomacy prevail, and if Hungary's prostration becomes an excuse for fomenting counter-revolutionary intrigues there, only chaos and final Bolshevization can follow. It was this line of policy which restored feudalism under the dictatorship of Horthy.[8]

The third and most important single factor, of course, is the future attitude of Soviet Russia. Will she sacrifice her real interests in order to satisfy revolutionary dogmatism and to indulge in imperialistic power politics? Hungary already lies in her economic and military sphere. All that is really essential to the Soviets now is that they shall have a government there which

[8] By the way, it is intriguing to speculate why Horthy seems still to enjoy a dignified freedom when many of his accomplices were executed as war criminals.

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is solidly and loyally coöperative with them. They can have such a government easily if they do not impose orthodox Bolshevik forms on the country and do not hurt the traditional sensibilities of the Hungarian spirit — in short, if they avoid oppression and terrorism. Why should they do otherwise? The Hungarian peasantry is intelligent enough to accept higher forms of agrarian coöperation which will prove far more productive than the compulsory drill of the *kolkhozes*. Russia herself has introduced more freedom and a larger degree of individual property, and the process is not yet at an end. As for an ambitious scheme of industrial socialization — why not? The only proviso is that they do it effectively and do not attempt an absurd experiment in paper socialization like that which in 1919 made all production impossible. In Hungary the road is open to really constructive experiments in socialization, since there are very few people there who would shed tears for that hybrid form of capitalism which amassed enormous profits by the ruthless exploitation of monopolistic positions.

The possibility that Russia will permit Hungary to develop in such terms does not seem to rest on empty illusions. Why should she reject this type of transformation? Why should Stalin return in Hungary to the policy of militant Communism or revolutionary mysticism which he has abandoned at home? According to reliable witnesses, we can expect profound transformations within the U.S.S.R. After the terrific sacrifices of this war, the Soviet people may ask that the great promises of the Stalin Constitution of 1936 be put into practice. And every Russian step toward freedom and personal liberty, and every check on the omnipotence of the Russian state, will also encourage and permit a more liberal and democratic spirit in the liberated countries, especially those in the twilight zone.

One must not be too optimistic. On the other hand, I regard it as a disservice to the cause of democracy to assert that there are no alternative possibilities in the twilight zone, to maintain that Russia is bound, in the spirit of a dogmatic materialistic determinism, to use her previous methods unaltered. I think those who fight the battle of liberty should be encouraged in their hope that they have a choice, a really important choice.